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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 001511

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SUBJECT: THE SARG'S HOSTILE PRESS CAMPAIGN AGAINST SINIORA

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Stephen A. Seche, per 1.4 b,d.

¶1. (C) Summary: While stopping short of an all-out escalation in its negative media comments directed at Lebanese PM Fouad Siniora and his March 14 allies, the official SARG media -- and at least one ostensibly independent weekly -- have in the past week harshened their public tone on Lebanon. Siniora has been attacked for not supporting the resistance in Lebanon and for making common cause with enemies of Syria intent on ruining bilateral relations. The news that two prominent Lebanese politicians and a journalist had been subpoenaed to appear in a Syrian court for "infringing on national unity" contributed to this harsher of rhetoric. The shift in media tone appears aimed at dampening expectations of an Asad-Siniora meeting and pre-emptively deflecting pressure that might build for the SARG to show flexibility on issues such as border demarcation and establishing diplomatic relations. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) In the past five days, the tone of some of the SARG's public statements and official editorial comment has taken on a decidedly sharper tone towards Lebanese PM Fouad Siniora and his March 14 allies. The SARG has used its own media in this campaign to highlight the criticism of pro-Syrian Lebanese politicians aimed at Siniora and his allies. In addition, al-Iktisadiya, a nominally independent weekly (largely focusing on economic issues) published an April 2 editorial attacking Siniora and his allies as those "who killed off the Saudi initiative." It criticized Siniora as "an employee of Sa'ad al-Hariri" and described the PM as "biased." The editorial, by editor-in-chief Waddah Abbed Rabbo, who is close to President Asad and the First Lady, said that Siniora may come to Damascus to speak about "opening embassies and demarcating borders" but "he will not have any Syrian popular support because he did not prosecute any of the criminals who assassinated Syrian-Lebanese relations." On the prospect for establishing diplomatic relations, it insisted that "there will never be normalization with the group of the mercenaries in Lebanon," presumably referring to the anti-Syrian majority in the Lebanese parliament.

¶3. (SBU) SARG Information Minister Mohsin Bilal commented on Syrian TV April 2 about the prospects for an Asad-Siniora meeting by pointing to President Asad's insistence that any such meeting "should have good preparation" and adding that "the entry to Syria is through the resistance. The one who works against the resistance, according to Syria and all the honorable ones of the world, is working against his national pride, and Syria would not open its gates to any side that works against the resistance or national honor."

14. (SBU) An editorial by the editor-in-chief of the official al-Ba'ath newspaper repeated Bilal's line, noting that "Siniora's visit is not expected to take place without Siniora showing clear positions, especially after Siniora's attempts, through his confusing stands, to circumvent the success of Lebanese President Lahoud in obtaining an Arab confirmation of support for the Lebanese resistance" (at Khartoum). The Lebanese daily as-Safir quoted official Syrian sources saying that "there is no hurry for Siniora's visit."

15. (SBU) In the midst of this shift towards harsher anti-Siniora rhetoric, regional media reported that a Syrian court had issued subpoenas for three Lebanese: politicians Walid Jumblatt and Marwan Hamadeh, and journalist Fares Khashan. According to press reports, the Syrian lawyers syndicate had brought charges against the three in a court in the Latakia region for "infringing on national unity."

16. (C) COMMENT: The SARG's attitude towards a Siniora visit seems to have hardened in the past week, since the conclusion of the Khartoum summit. The Syrian press campaign seems to represent a SARG attempt to send public signals to its Lebanese allies -- including President Lahoud -- that they can count on SARG support for their efforts to keep PM Siniora and the March 14 movement on the defensive. The latest SARG campaign also seems aimed at pre-emptively deflecting any pressure that might build for it to show flexibility on issues such as border demarcation and establishing diplomatic relations, both of which Siniora would be expected to raise during a Damascus visit. As for the subpoena, while its legality and the validity of the charges supporting it are questionable, given the overtly political nature of the

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action, we don't expect anyone to challenge the court's decision. Precisely because the message is so political and -- given the potential severity of the punishment -- so ominous, we also believe the SARG intended to pointedly remind its opponents in Lebanon that it has many tools at its disposal -- not all of them as ostensibly legal as this one -- with which to silence them.

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